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ABSTRACT

Issues related to the authority structures governing local public school districts are presented in this volume, which includes a paper and three discussant comments. The thesis of the main paper is that school organization affects the outcomes of public schools. The relationship between features of the formal authority structure to central reform issues, such as recruitment and retention of faculty, quality of decision making, resistance to change, and accountability, are examined. Discussant articles question whether the legal authority structure of school districts is the operable structure. Pointing to the de facto reduction of school board powers, the first discussant article concludes that if power is centralized, it occurs at the state, not district, level. The second article differentiates between formal authority structures and actual power, whether formal or informal. A conclusion is that organizational change based on formal distribution of power and authority has been ineffective because it has failed to address socioeconomic constraints on decision making. The last article questions whether all districts share the same structure and argues that change may have been ineffective because the actual distribution of power in school districts may already be efficient. A bibliography of 29 items accompanies the main paper. (LMI)

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Proceedings of the New York Education Policy Seminar



Dan C. Lortie

Edited by Frances Kemmerer

**Comments by:
David Istance
Gordon Purrington
Alan P. Wagner**

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**Overlooked Aspects in the Study of School Policy:
The Importance of District Organization**

Proceedings of the New York Education Policy Seminar

Dan C. Lortie
University of Chicago

Edited by Frances Kemmerer
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Preface

This publication is one of a series published by the School of Education and the Rockefeller Institute of Government. The paper, discussant comments, and author's rejoinder were first presented at a School of Education/Rockefeller Institute *Education Policy Seminar*. The Seminar and this publication, in particular, are intended to reflect the fundamental connection that professional schools must have between the world of ideas and discovery and the world of problems to be solved.

Excellence in research encompasses many different kinds of activities and serves many different purposes. The School of Education is committed to research that advances the power of the individual disciplines to explain, predict, and define new problems while fostering critical resistance to exaggerated or particularistic claims on their behalf. The goal is to create new knowledge while also preserving and exploring the complexities of the field.

The liveliness and creativity of research depends on the long-standing tension between the urge to advance disciplinary claims as far and as rigorously as possible, and the contrary urge to subject these claims to critical scrutiny among a variety of interdisciplinary considerations. For this reason the School of Education has carefully fostered the tradition of interdisciplinary research that is responsive to the needs of both scholars and practitioners.

It is at the intersection of the disciplines and at the junction of problems of practice that schools of education must stake their reputation. In this context the objectives for the Education Policy Seminar are:

- a. To provide a bridge between education as a field of study and the social and behavioral disciplines;
- b. To provide an opportunity for policymakers to analyze educational problems through the lens of one or more of the social and/or behavioral disciplines; and
- c. To provide a forum where the traditions of scholarly research in the pursuit of new knowledge and fuller understanding are focused on the task of enhancing the quality of life through education.

The format of each seminar includes the presentation of a paper by a leading scholar from an academic discipline. The author is charged with examining the field of education through the lens of his or her discipline for the purpose of trying to both inform and improve educational practice. The paper is responded to by two or more discussants and is followed by a rejoinder from the author. The proceedings are edited by a member of the School of Education faculty.

As mentioned previously, the Education Policy Seminar is offered in cooperation with the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, State University of New York. In this regard, we are particularly indebted to Warren Ilchman, the former Director of the Institute, and David Andersen, the current Director, for their interest, cooperation and generous support of the Seminar and publication of the proceedings.

Finally, we trust the reader will find this publication stimulating and we invite and welcome comments.

Robert H. Koff
Dean

Editor's Introduction

The first wave of school reform literature in the last decade focused primarily on the cognitive outputs of schooling and to a lesser extent on schooling outcomes, such as job preparedness. The second wave emphasized issues related to teachers (training, compensation, supervision, and time allocation). The papers in this volume suggest that the third wave will address issues related to the authority structures governing local public school districts.

Hallowed by law and tradition, an authority structure which provides school boards with broad powers and professional educators with few has remained virtually unchallenged. Yet, it can be argued, many of the questions raised in earlier treatises with respect to appropriate curricula, allocation of teacher time, and the professionalization of teachers cannot be resolved until the structural issues are addressed.

In his own words, the main thesis of Professor Dan Lortie's paper is that "school organization affects what public schools can accomplish." Lortie links the characteristics of the formal authority structure to what he sees as the central reform issues—the recruitment and retention of productive professionals, the quality of system decision-making, resistance to change, and accountability.

The comments made by Gordon Purrington, David Istance, and Alan Wagner question whether the legal authority structure of school districts is, in fact, the operable structure. Purrington points to the *de facto* reduction of board powers by federal and state mandates, legal decisions, and the societal shifting of responsibility for child welfare to school districts. He concludes that if power is centralized, centralization is at the state, not the district, level.

David Istance argues that there is a real danger in confusing formal authority structures with "actual power, formal or informal." Organizational change based on the formal distribution of power and authority has had disappointing results because it did not adequately address the constraints on decision-making caused by socioeconomic factors.

The view that the organization of schools is but one of many constraints governing decision-making in education is shared by Alan Wagner. He raises the further question of whether all districts should have the same structure. The implication is that change may not only be inefficient because it does not address the actual authority arrangements, but that the actual distribution of authority in any given district may already be efficient. Current teachers, for instance, may not want to pay the price for greater responsibility for school decisions.

In sum, the complexity of issues raised in the papers sets an agenda for research which, in turn, could prioritize the often conflicting recommendations for the schools of the future.

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Overlooked Aspects in the Study of School Policy: The Importance of District Organization

Dan C. Lortie
University of Chicago

The word "policy" both denotes and connotes meanings. What it denotes is found in dictionary definitions which emphasize *broad* plans and courses of action which constrain other decisions and activities (*American Heritage*, 1970). In governmental spheres, the idea of breadth translates into that which is more general, placing national above state and state above local. Public policy is more likely to gain scholarly attention when it deals with what transpires at higher levels of government. It appears that the study of public policy connotes the notion of *current* concern; as Paul Peterson points out in a review of the politics of education, studies tend to follow those topics which have engaged policymakers and their constituents (Hannaway and Lockheed, 1986). In education, we are inclined to associate policy with such large and continuing problems as racial integration, schooling for the handicapped and the role of the federal government in educational matters.

I will argue today that the study of public policy should pay greater attention to a topic which is neither federal nor the subject of public discussion—that is, the structure of local school districts and its linkages to policy questions. It is possible, with only a little stretching and hauling, to claim that this topic is not remote from our usual conceptions of policy. Although local school organization is manifestly not a federal matter, it is assuredly a general one—local schools are the place where public school students receive their schooling and similarities in their structure point to considerable generality. It is possible to argue (I hope persuasively) that their organizational features are involved in problems which have gained widespread attention. I will so argue, tracing connections between district structure and personnel issues, the quality of decision-making, change and finally accountability.

The presentation is organized into three sections. First, I will present a characterization of school district structure which, given the present state of our studies and time limitations today, must be closer to a silhouette than a full-scale portrait. The specific features identified in that characterization will be invoked when we then turn to examine the four problem areas mentioned a moment ago. The lecture closes with a few comments on strategies for change and approaches we might take to better understand their effects on school operations and general performance.

Two realities compel a modest tone in this lecture. The first is that although we have some research available on school organization, much remains undescribed and uninterpreted; the second reality is that we have relatively little theory linking organizational life and policy issues—it is the latter, in fact, for which this paper is a plea. Thus many of the statements I will make should be construed as hypotheses needing verification or rejection. At the same time, I hope that enough of them hold sufficient plausibility to support the central thesis that the protracted analysis of school structure will help us think more clearly and act more effectively in the provision of public schooling.

Some Features of School District Organization

On one level of abstraction, formal organizations in our society have much in common; for example, we expect them to announce their purposes, formalize lines of authority, differentiate the tasks and responsibilities of those within and try to ensure a steady flow of funds to keep the organization a going concern. Or we recognize that, as in Parsons' classic article, they must relate to the environment (institutional level), devise ways to allocate resources (managerial level) and employ persons to perform the core tasks of the organization (technical level) (Parsons, 1958). Organizations tend to look alike when we use such frameworks, but when we examine closely the ways in which they engage in those processes, particular features begin to emerge. Taken in combination, these particular features give any single organization or organizational type its distinctive character.

I wish to concentrate today on four characteristics of school districts which contribute to their special character. They are probably not the only features which are important, but they will permit us to undertake our examination of the interaction between school structures and policy matters. The organizational features are (1) the broad powers possessed by governing boards, (2) the vulnerable position of the chief executive officer, (3) centralized arrangements for decision-making and (4) a hierarchical structure in which technical participants are excluded from organizational decision-making.

School Board Powers

Some public schooling goes back to the very earliest days of the Colonial Era—it is widely known that the fear of the wilderness and its possible effects on the young led to the creation of schools in New England. In fact, those colonists created arrangements in which leading citizens, acting first in general organs of local government and later as increasingly specialized school bodies, established schoolhouses and hired teachers to work with the young (Bailyn, 1960). But Cremin points out that there were many different kinds of schools during the Colonial period and the early years of the Republic; *systems* of schooling did not emerge until the nineteenth century (Cremin, 1970). Prior to the formal structuring which took place then, there were probably two general types of governance arrangements. In the public sector, school boards raised the funds, hired and fired the teacher and saw to it that the schoolhouse was in good repair. Where teachers worked as private entrepreneurs, they did whatever "administration" was required (Kaestle, 1973).

It was during the nineteenth century that the modern school district took its shape, a shape which resembles, in significant ways, what we see today in public schools. As the eastern cities expanded, the number of children increased sharply and were crowded into considerably smaller areas than had previously been the case in rural America. The multiple classroom school was created and, to head this new organization, the principalship as well. These schools were gradually combined into city school districts with a single system of authority and control (Cronin, 1973). The citizen members of these school boards found the administrative load increasingly burdensome—it was more than part-time persons, with other obligations, could handle. The position of superintendent was created and before the end of the century, had become standard throughout the nation. The basic structure of school

districts was set: the school board stood at the apex, hiring and supervising the superintendent who, in turn, oversaw a pyramid composed of principals, teachers and students.

Sometimes that which does *not* happen can be significant in the development of organizations. What did not happen during these formative years of the modern school district was any serious effort to redefine the formal powers of the board of education and reallocate some of those powers to the newly created administrative positions. Boards retained the formal rights and obligations of governance, delegating to the superintendent operational responsibilities and the obligation to recommend particular action to the board—action across the whole range of school affairs. Superintendents were not granted distinct and independent formal powers and the right to make final decisions in any specific domain of issues. Major decisions were to be brought to the board for review and either acceptance or rejection; since superintendents served at the discretion of the board (with varying degrees of contractual protection), it was clearly wiser for the superintendent to define “important” in broad terms lest he be accused of usurping board powers. The position of the superintendent came closer to that of the “executive secretary” than to that of a “president.”

It is true that informal understandings have developed over the years since the inception of the modern school district; some leeway has developed to permit the superintendent, as a full-time executive reporting to a board composed of part-time persons, a degree of managerial discretion. The board, it is said, makes the policy decisions and leaves administration to the superintendent, but what experience has made clear is the basic ambiguity of this distinction and frequent incapacity of boards and superintendents to agree on the specific implications. No clear differentiation has been established, for example, between those matters which are primarily in the domain of the board and those which are primarily issues requiring “professional judgment.” While individual boards and superintendents can and do negotiate such matters on an ad hoc basis, tacit agreements made between the superintendent and the board may change when new members replace old. Nor is there any assurance that these tacit understandings will prevail when trouble arises and political pressures build on school board members. In short, informal understandings are fragile and idiosyncratic—there is no *formal* set of understandings to differentiate board rights from those of even the highest subordinates in the country—at-large. If this is the case with the highest staff position in the system, it is clear that others of lower rank have very little claim to the right to participate in policy formation and overall administrative matters. The formal right and obligation to govern school districts rests with the school board. It continues to rest there and is established in the law undergirding public schools (Alexander and Alexander, 1985).

More should be said about changes which have taken place since the formation of the modern school district. One set of changes consists of an increase in the external controls exercised over local school districts. Campbell has documented the heightened control emanating from all branches of the federal and state governments and the enhanced capacity of national bodies to influence state affairs (Campbell, *et al.*, 1985). In internal governance, constraints have also emerged in the power of school authorities to affect the work lives of employees as tenure, fixed salary schedules and collective bargaining have reduced the scope of board authority. But the latter changes have a particular quality—although they limit the decision-making range of those in authority, they do not simultaneously add to the capacity of employees to participate, in a proactive fashion, in the making of district decisions. Unlike

universities and hospitals where employed members of the staff have formalized participation in governance as members of such bodies as faculty senates and the executive committee of the medical staff, principals and teachers at most serve on committees with no more than advisory powers.

The scope of board powers, then, is very broad—it includes curricular as well as architectural matters, the selection and promotion of professional staff as well as the letting out of contracts, and the initiation or termination of instructional programs as well as efforts to increase revenues. School boards meet frequently and they meet openly, acting, in fact, as forums where local citizens can lodge their complaints and press for particular projects. The board is the grand authorizer of district policies and practices, and nothing of real consequence can happen without its participation. The twentieth century may have witnessed striking profusion in the specialized roles within school districts and the development of a large array of educational programs and procedures, but governance has remained—formally and legally—in the hands of usually less than a dozen part-time citizens.

Superintendent Vulnerability

The vulnerability of superintendents rests upon their susceptibility to dismissal by boards for a wide variety of reasons; in fact, the power of boards to hire and fire superintendents is one of the most critical aspects of their authority. Vulnerability is a social, psychological and cultural as well as an economic fact, a powerful theme which permeates the conversation and outlook of superintendents as well as the educational administration literature. Given its prominence and the influential position of superintendents as the administrative heads of school districts, it is not surprising that such vulnerability plays significant part in the way in which authority is exercised in school systems.

Callahan has shown how the vulnerability of superintendents during the early years of this century influenced their views on management; as they worked closely with boards dominated by members of the business elite, they transferred business ideologies (e.g., scientific management) to the school setting (Callahan, 1962). I believe that such vulnerability continues to influence the way in which authority is exercised in school districts, in particular, the perceptions which principals have of the concerns of their superordinates, superintendents. These observations are based on research I am conducting on the work life of elementary school principals in the suburbs around Chicago.¹

As salaried employees, principals are clearly subject to the rewards and sanctions available to those who are higher in the vertical authority system of school districts. Their careers hinge on how the superintendent and the board assess their effectiveness in running their schools; higher-ups assign them to particular schools, grant or do not grant salary increases, help or do not help if they seek positions in other organizations. The enrollment declines of recent years have added to their job anxieties: will the next school to be closed be mine?

One of the understandable consequences of superintendent vulnerability is the concern superintendents show for the state of public opinion and for the degree of satisfaction which community members express to board members. The response of local publics is significant

for many board members, for it affects their standing in the community; the rewards of public service associated with board membership are largely those of prestige, or, in Max Weber's terms, "status honor" (Gerth and Mills, 1948). Superintendents have a vital stake, therefore, in winning a favorable rating for the school and for their own performance.

This view of the significance of public opinion underlies the responses of principals when we ask them about the ways in which superintendents evaluated their performance. The modal theme is that superintendents rely most heavily on the comments emanating from parents in the principal's school; the presence or absence of complaints is seen as cardinal.² Parental assessment, as far as these principals are concerned, outranks outcomes such as test results or the quality of programs in the school. The same idea is also found when we ask principals to identify the major sources of information used by superintendents in evaluating the principal; parents are ranked as the primary source of such information.³ We cannot know, of course, whether superintendents in the respondents' school districts intended to convey this message, but we do know that principals perceived this to be the reality and, as W. I. Thomas taught us years ago, such beliefs have consequences (Thomas, 1927). These principals believe that their superordinates place highest value on the production of satisfied parents; there is the clear implication that the wise principal is a principal who avoids trouble. For principals, this is not an incentive system which favors the taking of risks in the hope of achieving major gains in student learning.

Centralized Decision-Making

The powers of the board, then, are not only broad but they also play a major role in the work of the superintendent—the latter official must work closely with the board across the full gamut of school affairs. The superintendent seeks to inform and anticipate and to seek the acceptance of recommendations on instructional as well as other matters. But the day-to-day affairs of the schools also come into play, and it is important that events there, as much as possible, not only conform to board policy but be handled in ways which provoke satisfaction rather than public dismay. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that boards and superintendents seek to assert control over schools. The result is that school districts are marked by considerable centralization in decision-making and that individual school units have a limited range for local determination of their actions.

It is useful to itemize some of the specifics in this matter of decision-making terrains. The curriculum is established by school personnel acting under the close supervision of the superintendent or an assistant, and larger districts have central officials who monitor classroom adherence to the curriculum and even, in some instances, specific ways of teaching the material. (Principals also see themselves as engaged in monitoring.) Budgets are developed by central office and usually leave little leeway for principals to deviate without authorization. All salaries, the major item of expenses, are set and administered centrally. Achievement testing is normally a central office responsibility. Buildings are opened or closed as central officials see fit and supplies ordered and distributed by central officers. The hiring of new teachers and specialists may involve some determination by the principal, but this is usually done from lists prepared by central office and often includes mutual consultation with a central office official; transfers are clearly the prerogative of central office. We have heard

much lately about the significance of "school site management," but one researcher studying a project of this sort reports that principals gain little true decision-making power as a result.⁴ At least at the elementary level, it falls to principals to find the "how" rather than the "what."

The centralization of decision-making in school districts is reinforced by values and norms which are part of the *public* nature of the schools we are discussing. I refer to the oft-noted tendency of school officials to equate equality of treatment with sameness of treatment, to see in uniformity of district practices a basis for claiming fidelity to ideals of fair and just execution of the public trust. Such uniformity is in turn buttressed by collective bargaining contracts which stipulate common standards for all schools and, in some instances, by state and federal programs which prescribe highly specific procedures in programs.

One consequence of centralization and uniformity in district practice is that persons working in the schools must, if they wish to affect school affairs, direct their efforts to the district level. This circumstance sets up a cycle which reinforces the process of centralization; what one school, for example, seeks for itself may become the norm for *all* schools. If energies directed toward improvement come to be associated with standardization, those who are opposed to such uniformity are likely to lose their zeal for change. Centralization may, therefore, be one of the factors which retards change and adaption in our public schools.

The Exclusion of Technical Personnel in District Governance

In the article we have already referred to, Parsons argues that where the technical work force is professionalized, there is a break in the line of authority between managers and those doing the technical work (Parsons, 1958). We do not find the kind of break described by Parsons in public school districts, for as we have seen, final authority rests with the board and there is no delegation of distinct decision-making authority to subordinates.

The status of teachers has been problematic for them throughout the history of the public schools; I have described that status as "special but shadowed" in earlier work (Lortie, 1975). In organizational terms, it is highly probable that during the Colonial period and the early Republic teachers ranked well below those leading citizens who served on the governing boards of whatever public schools existed; teaching was not even a regularized occupation until well into the nineteenth century—as in the case of waiting on table today, the work was done by persons who required no special credentials and who developed no lateral ties around their work. The associations which developed late in the nineteenth century were organized and run by persons who were usually other than regular teachers; although women made up the majority of those who worked in classrooms, they could not participate fully during the early years of these associations (Wesley, 1957). Classroom teachers had little or no voice during the crucial period when the modern school district was formed.

The men who organized the modern school system were not inclined to view the teachers of the time as coequals in the governance of schools. Most teachers at the turn of the century were ill-schooled, temporary employees; since the rules of the time required that women who married leave the occupation, few teachers had the opportunity to gain any considerable degree of classroom experience. The status of women at that time also made it seem quite natural that they should be subordinated to male administrators (Lortie, 1986).

The organization of schools and teaching hindered the development of lateral ties and a sense of collegueship among teachers even after they began to work side-by-side in schools and districts. The earlier geographical isolation of rural school life was replaced by a division of labor in which teachers worked essentially alone with a group of students; schools became organizations with a low degree of functional interdependence as elementary teachers worked with the same students for one year at a time and high school teachers worked with several such groups for a similar period. The arrangement of tasks, therefore, made it difficult for teachers to share their work experience, to develop a common discourse and to otherwise develop the grounds for "professionalization." Individual teachers faced school authorities in a series of dyadic relationships.

Some significant changes have taken place in the teaching force during this century. Today, teachers are comparatively experienced—the last NEA survey shows that the mean years of teaching experience is fifteen (NEA, 1987a). More than half have postgraduate degrees. Faculty members are in daily contact with students and are thus in a somewhat better position, compared to many administrators who taught years ago, to be familiar with cultural changes among young people and to assess the efficacy of different approaches and instructional materials. The status of women at work has undergone striking alteration making gender differences suspect as support for subordination to administrative officials.

The collective bargaining processes which hit their stride in the 1960s resembled earlier initiatives by teachers to increase their work security. As mentioned above, such contracts supplemented tenure arrangements and standard salary schedules in reducing the range of superordinate decision-making about the fates of individual teachers. It is only recently that we see union officials pressing for structural changes; in the main, collective bargaining, often constrained by state laws, is restricted to salary levels and working conditions narrowly defined. Despite many efforts to foster closer working relationships (e.g., team teaching, open space schools), most teachers continue to work independently of each other and with a limited amount of work sharing.

We have yet to see the formation of officials bodies in which school professionals—that is, teachers and administrators—meet together to work out instructional policies for school districts. There are committees appointed by administrators and although such committees may upon occasion exercise influence on district policies and practices, they remain essentially advisory; one finds widespread skepticism, even cynicism, among teachers who are likely to recall instances where serious committee work was greeted with either inattention or reversal by higher levels. The terms "hierarchy" and "subordination" continue to be accurate descriptors of the status of teachers in the governance of school districts.

In summary, we identified four elements in our silhouette of school district organization. The first is the concentration of formal powers—broad formal powers—at the school board level, powers which are built into law and custom. The second feature is the vulnerability of the chief administrator; it is incumbent upon the superintendent to sustain good relations with the board under circumstances where mutual rights and obligations are somewhat hazy. The third feature we have noted is that school districts are highly centralized organizations and that such centralization is linked to the view that uniformity of practice is desirable within the school district. Finally, we have observed that teachers have occupied a subordinate position within districts which, although softened by protective mechanisms,

provides them with only marginal opportunity to participate in shaping those decisions which facilitate and constrain the educational outcomes which take place in the public schools.

On Issues and School Structure

Having presented a silhouette of local school structure, it is now time to use its components in analyzing some issues of current significance. As I remarked earlier, these comments should be seen as consisting of hypotheses—hypotheses which are sufficiently plausible, I hope, to merit further attention as we try to resolve policy issues. Another objective will be to propose questions for research which link school structure and the issues in question. The four issues are, in order, the problem of personnel resources, the quality of system decision-making, resistance to change and issues of accountability.

Personnel Resources

One of the more urgent problems in public education is the need to replace a large proportion of teachers in the next few years as retirement shrinks the teaching force. There is concern that unless the occupation is made more attractive, it will not attract a sufficient number of able young persons (Carnegie Report, 1986). The quality of entrants will affect outcomes in schools for years to come—they will staff the classrooms, administer schools, districts and state offices of education and, if past patterns continue, compose the university staffs engaged in the preparation of subsequent waves of teachers. Classroom teaching is the main entrance to work in public education.

We cannot review the complexities of occupational choice and retention here today—we know that this area consists of a complicated mix of economic, psychological and sociological variables. I wish to comment on one set of considerations affecting teaching—that is, the strong connection between the state of affairs within the occupation and its capacity to attract young persons of ability.

I can think of no occupation which is more visible to more children and adolescents than public school teaching—the majority of children attend public schools and spend something like 15,000 hours in direct contact with teachers before they graduate from high school. Teaching is anything but arcane or exotic—it epitomizes the familiar. That familiarity is both advantageous and disadvantageous as teaching competes for young entrants; although it is low in the drama and excitement associated with the unknown, it encourages the development of identification with admired teachers which influences many young persons to select teaching as their occupation (Lortie, 1975). It is reasonable to infer, I believe, that how teachers feel about their work will influence recruitment rates in both direct and indirect ways. Disenchanted teachers will be less likely to urge students to become members of their profession and less likely to arouse admiration and the urge to imitate than will those who show enthusiasm for their work. The proportions of those who project gloom versus those who radiate satisfaction are probably of some importance in the numbers of students attracted to teaching; it is also probably true that the larger the size of the pool which is attracted, the better the probabilities are that it will contain able students.

Current efforts to increase incentives for entering teaching come after a period of decline in the interest of young persons in this kind of work and after a period in which teachers have felt less positive about their choice of career (NEA, 1987a). If we use willingness to select teaching again as an indicator of satisfaction, we find a sharp decline between 1961 and 1981; those saying they would again choose teaching went from 77 percent in 1961 to 46 percent in 1981. There appears to have been some leveling off in this striking decline, for in 1986, the figure gained 3 percentage points to 49 percent; it remains the case, however, that slightly less than half of this national sample of teachers would, given the chance to do things over, become teachers once more. A variety of explanations has been put forward for this decline in satisfaction—for example, it coincided with losses in real income due to inflation and teachers themselves sometimes complain that students are not as respectful as they once were. Among the probable causes, in my view, is the likelihood that teachers have become increasingly dissatisfied with the position they have been assigned within the hierarchy of school districts.

Some support for the view that teachers have become less satisfied with their status comes from Dade County, Florida, where two large-scale surveys were conducted twenty years apart, in 1964 and 1984 (Lortie, 1986 and Kottcap, Provenzo and Cohn, 1986). Despite a high degree of stability in responses to many items, we found an interesting difference in answers to a question on extrinsic rewards; 10 percent fewer teachers included—as a source of rewards—"the respect I receive from others." Such a lessened sense of respect, it seems likely, includes attributions to persons within school districts as well as in the community-at-large. More directly, declines in satisfaction were greater when respondents rated the work place than when they rated their core tasks. In interpreting these findings, I have argued that school districts impose structural strains on teachers; teachers have invested more over the years in their own schooling and in terms of work experience without receiving compensating gains in their position within the organization. Women, moreover, seeing serious changes in the possibilities open to young women today, experience a sense of relative deprivation, a feeling they were "born too early"; the occupations their daughters can enter offer more reward than they receive in teaching. As we observed earlier in this paper, the modern school district was designed in other times with other kinds of participants in mind; it has not been adapted to changes in those who work within it.

The task for those of us who are concerned about ensuring an ample supply of able persons into teaching includes, then, the problem of raising the general level of satisfaction of persons within the occupation. (There are other reasons, of course, for preferring that teachers like their work in contrast to the opposite.) But the goal is more easily stated than the means, for we still have much to learn about factors which contribute to teacher work satisfaction. For example, studies of their definition of incentives put intrinsic rewards high on the list; we know very little, however, about the ways in which structural and administrative factors may increase the receipt of such rewards. In what ways do status limits experienced by teachers cut into their sense of classroom achievement? What structural changes might make a difference? If a district concentrates on clarifying the right of teachers to have "freedom from" superordinate intrusion, does this raise satisfaction levels? What of the exclusion of teachers from authoritative participation in decisions about district and school affairs? In instances where participation rises above the pro forma, is there evidence of increased enthusiasm for teaching work? Where serious efforts are made to promote more

women to superordinate positions in the hierarchy, does this reduce dissatisfaction among women staff members in general?

We need knowledge, therefore, not only of those factors which attract young persons to particular occupations, but we also need to understand better how persons within the occupation are influenced by organizational arrangements and their variations. Given the warnings from those who study the demographics of teaching, there is apparently some urgency in finding answers to these and other questions about how to improve the flow of persons into teaching.

The Quality of Decision-Making

There is reiterated support for the idea that the quality of American schools is less than it could—or should—be; national reports, international assessments of student performance, media accounts, even a substantial number of education deans, focus on the shortcomings of our system of public education. If we grant that we should seek more productive schools than we currently possess, we can raise questions about whether organizational characteristics are involved; specifically, does the system of organizational decision-making in school districts make it more difficult for schools to attain quality in their performance?

Peter Blau pointed out some years ago that alternative kinds of structures can be differentially suited to alternative aims (Blau, 1956). The point was illustrated with two different kinds of structures—the vertical hierarchy of the armed forces and the egalitarian arrangements found in legislatures. The clear lines of authority and the expectation of immediate response to commands serve well when the object is to move large numbers of men rapidly; discussion of alternatives among those being moved would clearly prove ineffective under battle conditions. When we turn to another set of objectives, however, such as solving problems, other organizational conditions hold; legislatures are guided by norms of open and even protracted discussion with rules which protect the equal rights of those who participate in them. Military action, then, works best with hierarchy and obedience; the finding of solutions to problems in the polity and shaping those solutions into law requires arrangements which further the initiation and careful scrutiny of ideas.

The vertical structure found in school districts emerged in cities at a time when severe logistical problems had to be solved (Tyack, 1974), but today's problems seem to me to have an important ideational component—that is, we need better approaches to instruction and to find ways to make schools so productive that they can offset the difficulties which large numbers of students have in mastering school-based knowledge. We need to make the most of experience, to examine it closely for clues on how schools can become more generally effective in achieving the goals we ascribe to them. The problems today are not primarily a matter of building safe buildings for children but rather finding better programs of action *within* them.

How well suited is the hierarchical form found in schools to the generation and review of instructional ideas? It can be faulted, it appears, on several grounds. The first of these is that the concentration of powers at the board level and the need for the superintendent to be

involved in a correspondingly broad range of activities makes instructional matters but one set of considerations among many; these central purposes are not buttressed by a structure which ensures their centrality in day-to-day actions. As Campbell (1985) points out, superintendents must be "generalists" who can deal comfortably with fiscal matters, building construction, collective bargaining, etc. (In fact, it is not unusual (in large districts) for instructional matters to be delegated to one of several assistant superintendents.) There is no assurance that the logistics of instruction and the improvement of school performance will be granted a master position among all those which must be the subject of board and superintendent thought and action.

The second flaw in this structure lies in the systematic waste of observation and knowledge acquired by those persons most directly engaged in its central purposes and core tasks—teachers, specialists of various kinds and, in some respects, principals. As we have noted earlier, there are no arenas in which the information and insight gleaned from continual and up-to-date contact with students are gathered, interpreted and subjected to review for their implications for policy. (The administrative channels are often jammed with urgent matters requiring immediate resolution and have little space for such materials.) The top of the structure is overloaded with issues and problems while those in the lower levels are not deemed to have ideas of general worth; hierarchy imposes a definition of information value which depreciates instructional specifics, relegating them to a position below "administrative" matters. Thus in districts we find the use of advisory committees but the avoidance of truly influential participation by faculty members; at the school level, principals can (and often do) choose to rule the roost without much input from staff members. Hierarchy reduces the scope of participation from those who are not in the highest ranks; school districts have not learned to use egalitarian forms to provide fresh perspectives and to differentiate between useful and useless ideas in everyday practice.

A third difficulty has received more attention; that is the likelihood that persons working with procedures and practices which they perceive as imposed upon them will feel alienated from their work (McGregor, 1960; Likert, 1961; Ouchi, 1981). In the case of teaching, this possibility may be increased where teachers, needing space in which to make judgments necessary to their work, find superordinates promulgating rules and procedures which hamper their effectiveness. Observers have noted that many teachers seem comparatively uninterested in the organizational context of their work; to what extent is such lack of interest because teachers perceive that context essentially immovable and beyond their influence?

Finally, we find organizational factors implicated in another type of decision-making problem in school districts—their apparent difficulty in making and adhering to long-range plans. It is no doubt true that such constraints as the need to budget annually and restrictions imposed on the use of reserve funds complicate long-range planning, but structural characteristics such as the concentration of power at the apex and high turnover at that level also contribute to this problem. We see problems at both ends of the time spectrum—sudden shifts in policy when there is no rational basis for their adoption and surprise in response to events which could well have been anticipated.

The heavy concentration of responsibilities at the board level results in crowded agendas—urgent issues displace consideration of less pressing albeit significant questions of policy direction. When boards do manage to develop long-range plans, the plans may be undermined in a variety of ways. One is the tendency of some new boards to feel a low sense of obligation to continue with policies developed by their predecessors. Another is the loss of sustaining energy when turnover occurs in the superintendent's office; I have frequently heard superintendents predict the demise of particular innovations when the current superintendent moves on. Not many school districts have staff resources needed to undertake effective planning. We clearly need study of ways in which school districts might improve their capacity to plan ahead.

On Change

Widespread interest in reforming American schools comes in spurts as periods of calm are punctuated by outbursts of attention from the mass media and political figures. Today, amidst rhetoric tinged with anxiety about national productivity and international competition, governors and state legislators mandate changes in the conduct of schooling and school districts, as so often in the past, respond to such outside pressures. Although individual school districts may undertake new ways of doing things without outside intervention, it appears that the major sources of change during the last three decades have been outside individual school districts. Given that districts are the basic unit of school governance, one wonders about their lesser role in bringing about change—their comparative conservatism. Do organization factors play a part? This question could involve protracted inquiry much beyond what is possible here; I will only touch upon two aspects of the question. The first is the stability built into districts because of problems in differentiating school units, and the second is the issue of research and development in school districts.

We have already referred to uniformity and some of the reasons for its prevalence. There is an additional factor of some significance: school officials may resist innovation in particular schools because it differentiates one from the rest and, where parents are told which school their children must attend, such differentiation entails political risk. An example may make the point best. Visualize a district where an energetic principal and staff develop a program which promises to increase student motivation and learning and that the program in question attracts attention from the media. Before long, parents of students in other schools begin to demand that the innovation be extended to their schools. One can imagine several reasons why this could prove problematic for district officials. The innovation may rest, in the judgment of those officials, on special capacities present in the staff of the innovating school; for the officials to say so publicly leaves them open to accusations of distributing talent unfairly among the schools and/or risking a sense of insult among those in other schools. Funding issues may become involved if it turns out that even modest monies are needed to sustain the innovation in the originating school—to grant those while denying extension of the innovation to others adds further fuel to allegations of unfairness while to extend threatens the condition of the budget. Principals and teachers in other schools may not have the slightest interest in adopting the new approach and may resent central office "pandering" to parental demands. District officials may find themselves in a "no-win" situation, forced to choose between alienating large numbers of parents and damaging a promising program for students

in the original school. Painful events such as these may well reduce the zeal for innovation in a single school among district administrators and board members.

It is also difficult for school districts to introduce pilot programs of innovation in some of the district schools, as like pressures push officials either into dropping the innovation in the pilot schools or extending it to all others. I believe that the latter alternative is often selected before officials understand fully what successful implementation of the new ways requires and that the result is often superficial adoption of what otherwise, with proper preparation and resource support, might have proved to be a useful change.

The resistance to innovation based upon fear of political repercussions from school differentiation can be reduced if one of the constraints found in traditional school organization is relaxed—namely, coerced attendance at a particular school based upon residence. When parents are free to choose among alternative kinds of schools, the issue of inequity is considerably less important and differentiation becomes respectable. We will return to this question of choice a little later.

American school boards regularly expend substantial funds to procure the services of lawyers and accountants to assist them in their work; there is no visible reluctance to testing board decisions against the well-established logics used by members of those professions. It is interesting to note that although ideas based upon educational research and development may wend their way into board awareness via the superintendent and the occasional consultant, there is no *regularized* arrangement for boards to review their decisions against “templates” drawn from the increasing body of knowledge based upon educational research and experience; unless such knowledge is built into the recommendations made to the board by central officials, it is not likely to play a part in the decisions made by the board. Given the vulnerability of the superintendent—and the correlative need not to “push” board members too far beyond their personal opinions—existing knowledge probably receives less attention than it deserves; furthermore, weak procedures for using such knowledge implies low demand which discourages those who might otherwise work harder to strengthen it.

Perhaps the lack of routinized use of educational research and weak efforts in research and development reflect the social composition of boards of education in the United States. In the main, study of such boards identifies members as coming from the business sector and related occupations in urban settings and, of course, farm owners in rural locations (Zeigler and Jennings, 1974). The behavioral and social sciences do not figure prominently in the work worlds of those in the business sector or in agriculture; since the logics which underlie educational research come from those disciplines, their paradigms probably have little weight in the eyes of most board members. Superintendents who make arguments based on such research paradigms may find it simply is not effective. It is clear we need research on the circumstances under which research findings gain acceptance among educational decision-makers.

One does not have to aver that educational research currently constitutes a rich or directive body of knowledge to believe that its inclusion among the logics used by district decision-makers might increase the rationality of district policies and practices and increase readiness to question unreflective and traditional ways of doing things. Perhaps this is another respect in which the introduction of professional decision-making bodies—providing their charge included serious discussion of research information—might prove their worth.

The Question of Accountability

One of the alleged strengths of our system of local school districts is that elected board members (or board members selected by elected officials) increase the responsiveness of schools to the public will. There is considerable merit to this argument and one cannot dismiss it out of hand. Yet as is often the case, there is a gap between the intention and the reality; I will give brief consideration to some problems which arise in current provisions for accountability to community publics. The first of these problems has to do with the choice of board members, the second relates to the effectiveness of managerial controls and the third to variations which raise questions of equity in the provision of services.

What information is available to voters when they select persons to serve on a local school board? Specifically, what data do they have when deciding whether to retain board members or replace them with newcomers? The usual situation, I submit, is one where there is limited information on which to base such a decision. (The same probably holds for elected officials who select board members, except one would expect their agendas to be somewhat more complex.) The media report the more sensational events, of course, such as scandals involving sex, drugs or the misuse of public funds; for boosters of one or another sport, there is the record of games won or lost. (This is not a flippant remark, for I have met a significant number of school officials who believe such outcomes have considerable impact.) Taxpayer groups may publicize expenditures which they view with alarm or commend boards for their economy. What is generally lacking, however, are reports which contain rich and reliable information on what has taken place in the school district and on instructional outcomes placed in a sophisticated context. Some school districts publish the results of achievement tests, but these are not normally accompanied by data on prior levels of achievement nor do they usually include information on related variables which can assist interested persons in estimating whether the schools are producing gains, staying the same or falling behind. In my research on suburban school districts, I found that districts publish those data which put them in the best light; prosperous districts typically publish comparisons with nationally normed figures while lower income districts announce scores on locally referenced tests. Although it may occur, I understand it is rare for districts to report on a broad range of outcomes with data on affective results with students, employment placement rates alongside college admissions, etc.

The railroad entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century were inclined to exaggerate the extent of their profits; this eventually led to widespread concern about corporate reports and the development of public accounting as a routine part of business life (Chatfield, 1974). Although methods of educational evaluation have received considerable refinement in recent years, we do not find the more advanced approaches in anything like regular use by school boards. It is not necessary to deny that more is needed in such evaluative work to argue that considerably more information could be made available to the public-at-large on what actually happens in the public schools. It is somewhat ironic that state governments, often so eager to control local school affairs, have not generally seen fit to require them to make more comprehensive reports on their performance.

There is further irony in the second problem I wish to mention in this issue of accountability—the tension which prevails between the immense concentration of formal powers vested in boards and the difficulties which top officials sometimes discuss (generally

quietly) in attaining adequate control over the schools and those who work in them. It is not unusual to hear board members and superintendents complain that the security measures teachers have attained over the years (e.g., tenure laws, salary schedules, seniority rights and collective bargaining) make control over district events somewhat problematic. To the extent that boards and superintendents feel severely constrained by employee protection, the current system of formal accountability is thrown in doubt. This is surely an important area for research and is one area in which we have some degree of variation—for example, is there evidence that the boards in nonunion districts in the South have greater capacity to implement policy at the classroom level? Among districts with similar constraints, can we find variables (e.g., different patterns of resource allocation) which are related to variations in control outcomes?

Finally, a few comments on an informal aspect of accountability—the influence which parental complaints exert on events at the individual school level. As noted earlier, my research indicates that principals perceive parental responses as critical in the evaluations they receive from central officials. Reliance on this mechanism seems, at first glance, quite reasonable—a form of “customer influence.” The problem lies, however, in the patterns which emerge where districts rely heavily upon this mode of accountability. Research indicates that higher income parents are more likely to make demands on the schools and to register dissatisfaction; the outcome is that schools with such parent clienteles are likely to receive more attention (and, in some instances, more resources) from central office (Summerfield, 1971). This form of accountability violates our conceptions of equity in the distribution of public goods, yet it is also recognized that such informal processes are hard to control. We need research on ways in which some districts may be able to sustain a reputation for being responsive to parents in particular schools while ensuring the equal distribution of their services and resources.

Some Concluding Comments

In describing and analyzing a construct such as “the modern school district,” one can create the impression that school organization is static, that its working assumptions are accepted without question. In fact, the opposite is the case; sharp challenges have been issued to conventional school arrangements. I will conclude with a few comments about those challenges and some suggestions on how policy research might proceed when competing programs for change are proposed and in the early stages of implementation.

There are, as I see it, three major challenges to conventional school arrangements—increased bureaucratic intervention by state governments, market approaches to providing educational services and efforts to “professionalize” teaching. Each approach attacks some feature of the established system—state intervention undercuts local control, market approaches throw doubt on the primacy of public responsibility for schooling while schemes for professionalization challenge the historic distribution of authority within school districts.

When talk turns to specific action proposals, one's own values cannot be ignored and readers should, I believe, be given at least some inkling of the writer's inclinations. I will take a moment or two to state two principles which I believe should be observed in efforts to

change schools. First, I think change *is* needed and that it is vital that we view our educational organizations as *means* toward higher ends, not as ends in themselves; the organizational arrangements we have today were enacted by earlier generations and can be revised today—they are not sacred institutions. The second principle to which I adhere is that there is little to be gained by declaring one approach to be the font of all wisdom, the single best solution for all purposes. In my view, each of the approaches can serve some useful purpose and our analytic efforts should focus on discovering the specific utility and specific limitations of each approach. This second principle effects my view of the strategies we should adopt in the study of organizational policy in the years ahead.

Let me illustrate, briefly, what I mean by the foregoing. The actions taken by state governments in recent years have been directed at controlling the curriculum and teaching forces in school districts, and it is too early to tote up the damage done versus the gains achieved. Arthur Wise has warned us of the dangers inherent in heavy reliance on bureaucratic, rationalistic approaches, and given the distance of state legislatures from classrooms, his concerns carry considerable credibility (Wise, 1979). But the intervention of state governments need not be restricted to substantive regulations and controls and need not undermine local community efforts to influence their schools. An example is a recent innovation in Illinois requiring that local districts issue "report cards" for citizen review; although the data stipulated for such reports are less than ideal, the direction is toward increasing the information available to *local* publics and toward more effective accountability.

One more point should be made in regard to state controls over school districts. We cannot reasonably anticipate any major revisions in school structure without the heavy engagement of state governments; the law, of course, puts these governments in most direct charge of public schools (Alexander and Alexander, 1985). State governments, moreover, have provided an increasingly high proportion of funds for local school support (NEA, 1987b). Formulating and gaining acceptance for any major changes will require their acceptance by state officials, and deeper understanding of decision-making processes on educational issues and belief systems among state legislators will surely prove their worth in the years ahead. Research on all facets of state government and schooling should be increased, and close attention paid to the effects of state policies on local school outcomes and organizational processes.

Advocates of choice in schooling range across the spectrum of political ideologies; some advocates would probably cheer the disappearance of public schools altogether while others are somewhat more restrained in their enthusiasm. The political realities are extremely complex in this regard, ranging from difficult constitutional issues when religious schools are involved to deep opposition from some public school supporters to any major revision in financial arrangements. Hansman's position on the special merit of not-for-profit forms when consumers fear that they cannot fully evaluate a service is relevant as well; users should not have to worry that the quality of the services is reduced when profits are taken (Hansman, 1987). Taking these complexities into account, I expect that choice models will develop primarily within the public sector as districts relax attendance constraints and permit individual schools to compete for students.

Choice within school districts is already present in some cities and other large districts—it is evident in the magnet school concept. Should such forms spread, they could engender a series of significant effects, not the least of which would be to weaken central controls and enhance staff participation in school decision-making; the latter would increase, I suspect, as the individual schools, confronted with creating a distinct identity and distinctive program, confronted a sharply increased decision load, a load which many principals would be pleased to share with staff and pressed to share with members of the school constituency. The district school boards would probably become less engaged in programmatic specifics and more engaged in regulating competition between schools, deciding when and where to build or close schools, etc. But such developments cannot be predicted strictly from our current organizational theories; we will need close-in observational studies of situations where this approach is adopted to understand the range of repercussions.

Choice for families will also increase accountability of schools by adding another element of public control—choice will supplement voice. Researchers, however, should pay close attention to what actually happens; for example, they should study the ways in which schools are used. Do transportation arrangements, admission criteria to individual schools and other details of implementation ensure equal access to educational benefits? Again it is critical to match professions of intent against realities of implementation and to uncover problems not with the aim of attacking any particular approach as unworkable but in the hope of finding ways to include its strengths in public education.

That teaching should become a profession is not a new idea, but that idea has acquired considerable force in recent years. Teacher associations are putting together new kinds of agendas, and rich foundations, with support from powerful sectors of our society, are pressing for changes defined in terms of enhanced professionalization of teaching. The term “profession” condenses considerable diversity of thought—there is no uniform view of what it means to attain professional standing. There is the hope that professional recognition for teachers will add to it attractiveness among talented young persons and that enhanced collegiality will improve teaching practices as teachers share experience more effectively. Strategies include creating national certification, lengthening teacher preparation, instituting ranks within teaching, etc., but the implications for the authority structure of local school districts remain unclear. Even the most outspoken advocates of higher status for teachers seem reluctant to tackle the issue of realigning governance powers within school districts. Given the analyses undertaken earlier in this paper, it is clear that I believe this issue will become of central significance if the press for professionalization continues.

Research might pay particular attention to the role which teacher groups play in district and school decision-making. One possible scenario is that informal understandings about the desirability of teacher participation will gradually harden into recognized “rights,” and, as in British government, tradition will become paramount. But one can quite as readily anticipate that the courts will become involved and, without legislative authorization, will deny governance rights to other than state governments and duly selected boards of education. Another path might involve collective bargaining in which unions increasingly negotiate participation in school decision-making and find ways around restrictions on the delegation of board rights and responsibilities. There is enough uncertainty on what is likely to happen to warrant plans for careful research to observe what occurs and to identify factors which are associated with alternative outcomes.

It looks as if the years ahead will be exciting ones in public education—we seem to be on the verge of serious efforts to rebuild our institutions of schooling. There is much for us to study and analyze, and I believe we have a valuable part to play as our society seeks out better ways to educate the young.

Notes

¹The research is based on long interviews with 113 elementary school principals in fifty-nine suburban school districts surrounding Chicago. The sample is random, with a wide range in the socioeconomic background of school populations. That research was supported initially by the National Institute for Education and subsequently by the Spencer Foundation.

²Respondents were asked "What do you think is most important to central office when they evaluate your performance as a principal?" Sixty-four percent mentioned favorable reactions from parents and the lack of complaints about the school; 27 percent mentioned indicators of student performance.

³Respondents were asked "What source of information do you think has the greatest effect on the evaluation of your performance made by the superintendent?" Again the reactions of parents was mentioned most often—it was mentioned by 50 percent of the principals.

⁴Personal communication from Professor John Mauriel at the University of Minnesota.

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Some occupational autobiography may help to locate the nature of my remarks on Professor Dan Lortie's paper concerning overlooked aspects of the study of school policy. The OECD is an intergovernmental organization of Western industrialized countries covering North America, western Europe, Scandinavia, Japan and Australia and principally concerned with economic policy and forecasting. In addition, however, it has a small unit devoted to the analysis and exchange of ideas on educational policy-making in these countries. We act in a purely advisory and, we hope, informative capacity, having no actual binding powers over the school authorities and education ministries of our member countries. We straddle, therefore, the worlds of policy and research, borrowing from and giving to each, and we attempt to address issues that are relevant to educational policy in most, if not all, of those countries. This precludes the depth of knowledge of any one system that students of that country would possess. My reactions to Dan Lortie's interesting study are, therefore, those of an interested outsider, and, so to speak, of a jack-of-all-trades rather than a master of the intricacies of such a complex school system as that of the United States.

"Overlooked Aspects in the Study of School Policy: The Importance of District Organization" is at once fascinating and difficult. It is rich in detail and fertile in ideas. But it is not an easy read. And that derives not from any obscurity in the presentation of the ideas but from the sheer breadth and density of those ideas. My difficulties with the paper went further, though, and again an OECD background may have influenced these perceptions. For whereas the words of the title that most coloured my expectations of the paper in advance were "*school policy*," that which came through as the keyword after reading it was "*study*." Lortie's paper left me with the clear impression that here indeed is a vast agenda for further study; it is less clear, however, precisely why one should undertake that research and how it will contribute to better policy-making. A further general difficulty encountered is, perhaps, less explicable by personal biases: so many strands and ideas are proposed as desirable avenues for improvement that insufficient attention can be given to the numerous possible conflicts between them.

Both of these general remarks underpin a number of the criticisms that follow. Even though Lortie is at pains to emphasize that his paper is in the form of a series of hypotheses still awaiting analysis, I would argue for the value of further clearing of the conceptual ground before embarking on that more protracted enterprise.

I firmly support the plea for a strong research focus on the local level if one is to grasp the most promising routes to educational improvement. That plea is fully consistent with the main tenor of lessons learned by educational research over the past two decades or so—in particular, that changes in the organization and structure of national systems risk being mere alterations to the packaging of the same parcel unless the real world, local interfaces of teachers, students, parents, classes, and schools are understood and addressed. To make that case and to demonstrate the oversight referred to in the title in this way would require, however, that the contrast be drawn *between* the local level, appropriately specified, and the

more "macro" levels of school organization of states, regions, and the nation as a whole. This Lortie does not do.

The restriction of focus on the school district only perhaps explains certain of the unusual characterizations that emerge in the paper. School organization and policy are described as "centralized," a factor seen as retarding "change and adaptation in our public schools" (p. 6). To the educational observer in France, for example, where the national ministry in Paris has traditionally exercised such a powerful and embracing grip, or even in the classically decentralized British system where the basic administrative unit (at least up to the present) is the Local Education Authority (L.E.A.) of which there are 104 serving all England and Wales, such a description of a system organized into more than 15,000 school districts is at best misleading.

The point is not only a semantic one. The U.S. school system *is* decentralized. This means that there are very real limits to the formal powers that can be exercised from the higher reaches of the system, particularly from Washington, D.C., when all is not well at the local/district level. Direct pressure will instead be exerted through such individuals, bodies, or interests as superintendents, parents, and state education departments. It is thus difficult to maintain, as Lortie seems tempted to do, both that centralization is a major obstacle to change and that parent power is stifling the ability of superintendents or principals to develop imaginative and learning-center school policies. Or, relatedly, it is contradictory in the absence of further analysis both to argue for and approve the importance of local policy-making and to bemoan the lack of external mechanisms for rectifying ills when the latter become apparent in school districts. A third example in similar vein concerns the potentially contradictory stances taken in the paper towards rationality and standardization. Lortie switches repeatedly between making a plea for more informed, research-based school policies untrammelled by folklore and the pressures of ignorance, on the one hand, and warnings against the insidious standardization and the corresponding stifling of innovation, on the other. Summing up my worries about possible contradictions, if one operates a decentralized system, with that is bound to go *some* measure of idiosyncratic local influence.

My remarks thus far have concentrated on the local/national, decentralized/centralized dimensions of Professor Lortie's analysis. A second source of disquiet stems from the use of the *formal* distribution of power and authority as representing the significant patterns of actual power, formal and informal. This worry applies particularly to the first half of the paper. The formal distribution of authority is, of course, important. It is especially so, arguably, in the United States, wedded as the nation is to legalistic interpretations and solutions. But to identify the key role as residing in the school board or the superintendent using formal definitions of authority may be perilously like assuming that it is the signalman who is *the* crucial actor in ensuring that the railways operate smoothly. Well-functioning signals are, of course, vital for punctuality and to avert disasters. But from slightly different perspectives, the area manager, the engine driver, the ticket collector, the maintenance officer, and the cleaner may all lay claim to that foremost rank. My concern about over-reliance on formal definitions of authority is twofold: first, that in a situation of interdependence these definitions do not allow key relations and functions to be adequately identified; second, that, as above, the packing of the parcel may be misleadingly confounded with its contents.

The latter risk is, I believe, an important one to guard against in the education sphere. Time and again, organizational changes in the delivery of schooling have suffered disappointing results because powerful underlying forces—for example, inequalities of wealth and social capital, or cultural tradition—have proved stubbornly persistent. They possess a resilient capacity for twisting new shapes into old, familiar forms.

A third subject of reaction to the paper concerns not so much criticism of the arguments deployed but instead speculation on how the thread of those arguments would have altered had the *structure* been reversed. If one approaches the subject matter with a leaning towards the keywords of the title “school policy” rather than “study,” the logic of such reordering holds definite appeal. The two main sections would then be, respectively, “Issues and School Structure” and “Some Features of School District Organization.” By taking analysis of those issues and problems first—personnel resources, quality of decision-making, change, accountability—the purpose of the latter section would then be an examination of how the existing arrangements of local decision-making help or hinder their solution. The case made for oversight and for further research might then have been even more watertight. Without such concerted study of the school district (the conclusion could then have been), these agreed areas of outstanding issues and problems cannot be adequately addressed.

Fourthly, the plea for a substantial increase in, and use of, *research* at the local level requires some comment. Dan Lortie gives the educational politician and administrator poor marks for their efforts. They operate in a world of balancing books, of meeting parental demands, and of placating diverse interests, and hence are diverted from the primary goals of teaching, learning, and raising student achievement. The proposed way forward is thus both to return education squarely to the educators and to apply research as an alternative to the distortions of a bureaucratic political process. Schooling, let it be said, probably has become overly bureaucratic. Yet the bureaucratic ogre may be lurking no less ominously with the solution of a vast spawning of local research initiatives then to be closely applied to school district decision-making. The United States already sponsors a very substantial corpus of educational research that few can now master. This, following Lortie, would multiply several-fold as each school district undertakes regular new research enquiries so as to profit from the *process* as well as the *results* of investigation. How far the proposal for the more extensive application of research to local policy-making would fall foul of the very problems it is intended to overcome depends on the nature of that enquiry. If Lortie’s plea is for the reflective and flexible use of professional knowledge, it is hard to fault. If it is for a considerable growth of academic activity at the local level, and for its routine use in decision-making, the proposal would be less obviously beneficial.

That judgment needs further elaboration. To return to Lortie’s proposals: “there is no *regularized* arrangement for boards to review their decisions against ‘templates’ drawn from the increasing body of knowledge based on educational research and experience,” he complains; “weak procedures for using such knowledge implies low demand which discourages those who might otherwise work harder to strengthen it” (p. 13). This assumes, I believe, that application of knowledge and “templates” will be generously inspired. On the continuum of stick through carrot, Lortie’s proposal expects that use of research to lie well in the direction of the latter. But what if it is not? What if accountability is interpreted strictly in terms of performance on a limited number of indicators? And what if the caveats and cautions of

researchers are largely ignored and decisions taken instead on the basis of the very imperfect guidelines provided by extant knowledge? The direct use of research knowledge in decision-making, in other words, can prove distinctly double-edged.

To reiterate, Professor Lortie's paper correctly identifies schools and school districts as a crucial locus of educational activity and decision-making. I am less certain that the agenda of further study put forward will prove fruitful in all the areas proposed. There also remain, I believe, possible contradictions and conflicts between the directions Lortie wants U.S. education to pursue that warrant further clarification and, so far as is possible, resolution.

Comment by Gordon Purrington
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My comments on Professor Lortie's paper are influenced by four perspectives. The first is my understanding of organizational structure, process and behavior as a student and teacher of such topics. The second is my understanding of school organizations from the vantage point of a school board member for the past ten years and a member of the board of directors of the New York State School Boards Association for the past four years. The third is as a teacher and administrator in the elementary and secondary schools, and the fourth is the up-to-date information on how things really are in the real world from my school teacher wife.

The major premise of Lortie's paper is that the quality of American education is less than it should be and that this is due primarily to certain characteristics of school district organization. I agree with Lortie that the classic anatomy of the school organization must change so that new arrangements between management and other organizational members will provide for more self-realization opportunities for such staff. However, I disagree with his contention that the primary characteristic of school organization which requires modification is the alleged concentrated power of the school board. I also believe that he has not sufficiently addressed other organization issues which impact upon organizational decision-making, specifically environment, technology, and the individual characteristics of teachers and other staff.

Lortie asserts that the bureaucratic structure of schools is the product of the concentration of broad formal powers at the school board level which has created a highly centralized organization in which principals and teachers have little input into policy decisions which affect their work. These broad formal powers are built into custom and law. I have no quarrel with him that custom and law have influenced the way educational organizations are structured. He has documented this in great detail. This is not unique to educational organizations. Era of origin and culture are reported in the organizational literature as contributing to how organizations are shaped. State constitutions have established school boards as legal entities and given them powers to operate schools in the communities they represent.

However, Lortie does not consider the often restrictive aspects of the environment, legal, political, social, cultural, economic and demographic dimensions, on school board power. Schools are far more complex than they were in the mid-1850s. This has occurred because of the demands placed upon schools by the communities they serve, state governing boards, legislative bodies, court decisions, the changing character of student populations, the economy, and a major shift in cultural values and beliefs.

A substantial argument could be made that the problem Lortie should address is not the concentration of power at the school board level, but the powerlessness of boards of education. State and federal mandates in the form of laws, regulations and court decisions

have limited the power of school boards. Collective bargaining, public employee relations boards and other regulatory agencies have placed limits on the powers of school boards. State education agencies have increased in size, complexity and scope of authority. School boards in New York State must deal with more than 40 categorical aid programs. Eighty percent of a school district's budget is determined by mandates or negotiated contracts with district employees. What has occurred in the United States is that school boards have been given greater responsibilities with a corresponding reduction of their powers, while power and a corresponding centralization of decision-making has increased at levels external to the local school district. Management literature suggests that contrary to popular belief, the lack of power, not too much power, is often the cause of problems in organizations. School boards cannot share or delegate that which they do not possess. It may be that an increase in the power of school boards is necessary if the structural changes which Lortie suggests are to be implemented.

Lortie fails to address the relationship of the nature of the core technology (teaching) to the structure of schools. Technology in this sense is simply asking how teaching is being done. It is concerned with techniques and methods. As Lortie has noted, there is much uniformity in these areas, including standardized curricula. There is also a reliance on textbooks. Children are moved along in uniform stages from one class to another, one grade level to another, and with similar educational processes and procedures. Even though board policies and goals emphasize individualized instructional approaches, there is still little differential in the classroom. Teaching is still generally routine in its tasks and activities. Even if other mechanisms were implemented for such menial duties as collecting lunch money, taking attendance, supervising playgrounds and lunchrooms, and like activities, teaching as it is practiced today would still be repetitive and routine. The dissatisfaction of teachers which Lortie found may be due to high-growth need individuals performing fairly routine tasks in organizations which are restrictive. A routine technology is congruent with a mechanistic organizational structure. If school district structure is to change, the routine processes which are currently practiced in most schools and classrooms must be modified.

While Lortie implies that the bureaucratic model with its centralized decision-making provides teachers with a sense of powerlessness and dissatisfaction with teaching as a career, individual characteristics of organizational members may also contribute to such perceptions. Contrary to what might be expected, teachers in more bureaucratic organizations have reported a greater sense of power than teachers in less bureaucratic school districts. Teachers who come from professional family backgrounds have reported a greater sense of power than teachers from working class family backgrounds. Teachers in positions of responsibility have reported a higher sense of power than those not in such positions, and this was not related to the degree of bureaucratization of the district. Teachers who had a greater length of service in a school district have reported a greater sense of power than those who had less service. Teachers in districts where the superintendent utilized an arbitrary and oppressive style of management had a lower sense of power than in districts where the superintendent did not utilize repressive authority. The management style of the superintendent was not related to the degree of bureaucratization of the districts. Highly bureaucratic districts appear to have recruited teachers who initially had a greater sense of power (Moeller and Charters, 1966). This is consistent with the concept that empowerment is related to one's locus of control orientation. A strong case can be made for the position that a teacher's sense of power to

influence district policies may be related not just to organizational variables, but also to personal characteristics of the teacher.

Lortie's solution to the problems he describes is basically found in three current challenges to conventional school arrangements. The first is increased intervention by state governments. I have already discussed the possible consequences of such prior interventions concerning the power and autonomy of school boards and their ability to delegate under such mandates.

The second solution is a market approach to providing educational services. These are parental choice models such as voucher systems, tuition tax credits, and magnet schools. These might be referred to as parent empowerment approaches. Much has been written concerning these models. I will not repeat arguments for or against such approaches. However, competitiveness may not improve the quality of American schools, nor provide teachers with a greater role in decision-making. Organizations which are in competitive situations often find a need for increased control and coordination which can result in a higher degree of formalization and centralization in the organizational structures. In competitive schools, student programs and services may increase, but it may not be related to the needs of students as much as it is to keeping up with the competition. As a result, the cost of schooling may increase due to the proliferation of programs and services which are not justified by student needs. Ironically, such competition could reduce the amount of resources an organization might have to carry out more than just its routine activities.

Lortie next argues for the professionalization of teachers. Professionals make decisions which affect their work. They do not need highly formalized structures for purposes of control. Norms which provide for control should have been already internalized by the professional prior to joining the school organization. However, Lortie begs the questions of whether or not all teachers will become professionalized. There is some evidence that many teachers prefer not to work during the summer and enjoy the breaks during the year. For them, a career ladder is not an important feature if it means giving up this "reward." Many see this as an attraction to teaching.

For the professional model to work, teachers must not only be given responsibility for the practice of teaching, but must be willing to accept accountability for such practices. While, as Lortie suggests, teachers may desire greater responsibility, their union's stance in New York in recent years has indicated a general unwillingness to accept such accountability. For instance, teachers have been reluctant to accept peer evaluation when it is related to retention decisions. If professionalization is to occur it means a major shift away from the current craft union model to a professional one.

Additionally, whether a professional model would increase the quality of American schools must be questioned. Research shows that the professional licensing of other groups has not protected its clients or public as much as it has protected those in the profession.

In summary, I believe that teachers need to be involved in curricular and instructional policies and decisions which affect them. However, I reject the idea that a radically new structure is required for this to happen. Clearly, school boards and administrators need to become more adept at delegating responsibilities and the necessary power to their professional

staffs. State governments can help this by avoiding new mandates which restrict local prerogatives. I concur with Lortie that local boards, superintendents and principals should be a positive influence in working with teachers to nurture a climate of shared power, teamwork, professionalism and innovation. This includes local board policies, a varied reward system, recognition, incentives for excellent performance, and appropriate delegation of responsibilities which is balanced by accountability.

Reference

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Comment by Alan P. Wagner
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About a year ago, Secretary of Education William Bennett spoke of the "trembling factor" as a way to motivate improvements in schools and increase student learning. According to Bennett, the "trembling factor" had been introduced with some success by the Romans who, apparently, made the architects stand under newly constructed aqueducts when the scaffolding was removed. "Trembling factor," indeed!

Bennett's idea, I think, provides a useful starting point from which to comment on Dan Lortie's paper. Before deciding which organizational features stand in the way of improved student learning and efficiency in the schools, we need to begin with some idea of what we expect from schools (i.e., what load is the aqueduct to carry) and what are the best ways to provide learning opportunities for children (i.e., how should water be carried over distances). One suspects that the Roman architects developed their plans with a clear idea of what the aqueducts were supposed to do!

Such an approach leads us to frame questions about school organization in terms of the effects of various organizational features on the effectiveness and efficiency with which schools operate. Will changes in school organization lead to improvements in what schools do and how students learn? In the last section of the paper, Lortie asserts that the answer is yes and offers some initial and plausible arguments in support of his view. Such changes, he suggests, would generate improvements in personnel (recruitment, retention, and motivation), decision-making, planned change, and accountability—all of which should be associated with more effective and efficient schools.

The general proposition seems reasonable. What needs to be understood are the ways in which specific changes in school organization will lead to the desired improvements in student learning or in the efficiency of schools. Here, Professor Lortie observes, too little is known. Much of the research on school organization "remains undescribed and uninterpreted" and "we have relatively little theory linking organizational life and policy issues." However, let me offer a few observations which suggest limits in the extent to which changes in school organization can bring about improvements in schools and in student learning.

First, changes in effectiveness or efficiency realized through alternative organizational structures may be greater or lesser depending on the amounts and qualities of the available resources and the broader setting in which these resources are employed. The organization of schools serves as one set of constraints operating on the use of student, teacher, administrator, parent, and community resources. There is no single, ideal structure for all schools and, for some, particular features of the organization may (within very broad limits) simply not be very important. The implication is that changes in school organization may lead to smaller improvements in effectiveness or efficiency than the adoption of other strategies (incentives for students; school/work cooperative programs; parent education initiatives; teacher training/recruitment options).

This general observation may be illustrated by taking up one issue raised by Lortie: the problem of personnel resources. There are really two issues here. First, how does the organization of schools affect the ability to recruit talented, able individuals into teaching? And, second, how does the organization of schools affect what teachers actually do on the job?

With respect to the first, Lortie observes that the profession is unattractive to talented current and prospective teachers, in part because of the ways schools are organized. Lortie argues that the limited opportunities for participation in decision-making and for interaction with colleagues breeds dissatisfaction in teachers. The dissatisfaction is perceived by the students they teach and serves to discourage those students who might otherwise choose teaching as a profession.

The premise seems quite reasonable and probably doesn't go far enough. Potential teachers surely gather information about job conditions from sources other than their own teachers. However, the question to be answered is how important are working conditions such as autonomy and interaction with colleagues in attracting and retaining talented, capable teachers? Are qualified, capable individuals—the very ones we wish to attract and keep as teachers—choosing other careers in large part because of organizational features which they find undesirable?

The evidence on this point is not persuasive. When asked to list aspects of teaching which they regard as most important, current teachers do cite working conditions, autonomy, and participation as frequently as salary and compensation. Alternatively, those who have recently left teaching are far more likely to mention poor salary than any other aspect when asked to identify the main reasons they left. What are we to make of the pattern of responses? In part, they suggest that we may be looking at two separable groups with quite different sets of preferences. On one side, we have current teachers who choose to remain because the "package" of salary and working conditions more or less meets their needs. The preferences and choices of this group must be distinguished from those of former teachers, who chose to go because they found better "packages" in other occupations. To make the point yet another way, one of the more interesting contrasts in responses of Dade County teachers to surveys in 1964 and 1984 was the dramatic increase in the proportion of teachers who indicated that "the schedule (particularly the summer)" was among the most satisfying rewards to teaching. The increase, it seems to me, derives not so much from a change in attitude of teachers but rather from changes in the composition of the package of salary and working conditions that have attracted and retained teachers with different preferences in 1984 than was the case in the 1960s.

Moreover, changes in organizational features of the type envisioned by Lortie may not be fully embraced by teachers. It is generally argued that teachers are more effective in school organizations which provide for greater autonomy and increased participation in decision-making. But, are current teachers willing to take on the responsibilities associated with these working conditions? In a very limited recent set of interviews and surveys in five school districts, both teachers and principals indicated that teachers should not be heavily involved in the evaluation and recruitment of teachers. Generally, the responses seem to indicate that neither teachers nor principals see new leadership roles for teachers beyond those they already assume.

The finding is provocative. Schools reorganized to provide teachers with greater autonomy and greater participation in decision-making will require that teachers accept these new working conditions. Some, perhaps many, may not wish to do so. In this case, the problem becomes one of finding the appropriate incentives (including opportunities for professional training) to encourage current teachers to embrace, effectively, the new responsibilities. Further, incentives would need to be combined in such a way as to attract and retain those willing to teach effectively in an environment requiring individual initiative, professional interaction, and some accountability.

There are two lessons here. First, while changes in school organization may make teaching more attractive, they may not be very important in encouraging individuals to enter and remain in teaching. Second, the economic and working conditions highly valued by current teachers may not reflect the types of benefits (reduced disincentives) most desired by those from pools of prospective teachers. Such an observation raises the intriguing prospect that increased autonomy for teachers and greater teacher participation in decision-making in ways described by Lortie and envisioned by the Carnegie Forum might not only encourage particularly gifted, capable individuals to enter and remain in teaching but also discourage those not well-suited to teach to consider other occupations or to leave the profession. Salary incentives, unless selectively applied, would not distinguish between these two groups.

Finally, Professor Lortie's suggestions about ways to bring about changes in school organization which are "favorable" in terms of student learning results are intriguing and worthy of further research. It will be important to keep in mind that the policy options (state controls, market approaches, and the "professionalization" of teaching) operate in a larger environment where forces beyond the control of school authorities may also lead to the desired results. My own reading of the current situation is that improvements in recruitment, decision-making, planned change, and accountability have come about because of such "external" forces. As labor markets have tightened, teachers have gained a great deal of "leverage" in schools. Increases in salaries are but one indication. I suspect that the relative scarcity of highly qualified teachers has also forced school authorities to provide greater input for teachers at the very time improved conditions have attracted into the profession many who wish to fully participate in decision-making at the school, if not district, level.

As these comments indicate, Dan Lortie has reopened an important area for study, research, and action. Considerations of how the organization of schools affect what teachers do and what students learn are important. Because, to some extent, all of us—policymakers, administrators, teachers, researchers, students—are standing underneath the aqueduct.